

Unit 5 Communication and collaboration

Online communication (also referred to as computer-mediated communication, CMC) is classified as either asynchronous (time-delayed) or synchronous (real-time). Asynchronous modes of communication include the discussion board, e-mail, mailing lists, and blogs. Microblogging (eg Twitter) is a relatively new form of asynchronous communication characterised by a maximum character limit per message featured widely in Higher Education already. The synchronous tools include chat, whiteboard, instant messaging (IM) and video or audio conferencing. Furthermore, announcement tools (noticeboards) are useful to deliver information to students, such as reminders of looming assignment deadlines and student presentation areas give students the opportunity to share with their classmates their photo and personal details.

In addition, the internet makes social networking tools available that support interaction and foster the emergence of user communities. Students may already be familiar with social networking communities such as Facebook and bebo for staying in touch, Flickr for sharing photographs, YouTube for sharing videos, or social bookmarking sites for sharing web resources (eg, del.icio.us). Most social networking services support instant messaging and technologies for users to share blogs and files. Commonly referred to as social software (also social computing) these predominantly open source applications are also emerging rapidly in teaching and learning contexts to facilitate collaboration and working in groups (eg Wetpaint, Elgg, Joomla). In fact, even Edinburgh Napier has harnessed social networking technology and boasts an institutional presence on the likes of Bebo, YouTube and Twitter (have a look at <http://www.napier.ac.uk/prospectivestudents/Pages/SocialNetworking.aspx>)

Online communication tools intended for use with students need to be employed thoughtfully, however, and with a real purpose in mind. Otherwise, students will simply ignore them. A common complaint from some tutors is, 'Online discussions don't work.' or 'My chatroom is always empty' or from students, 'No one is reading my blog'. Online discussions or chats don't just happen by making the tool available to students-just like lecture halls don't fill by unlocking the doors. All online communication needs careful preparation, clear guidelines and most importantly, you there for support.

Using online communication tools brings with it a range of advantages such as:

- Flexibility for both you and your students-benefit from moderating a chat session bathrobed and barefooted.
- Participants are granted an equal voice, undistracted by visual cues. This often encourages even the most reticent of students to contribute.
- Global outreach - how else to link a student in New Zealand to the guest speaker in Osaka in a module delivered from Glasgow?

In this section you are introduced to:

- The most common modes of online communication used in education,
- Activities each communications tool supports well online
- Online collaboration guidelines and supporting collaborative tools
- A brief introduction to social software applications

1.0 Asynchronous discussion

The asynchronous discussion (also referred to as discussion board, discussion forum, online conference, bulletin board, message board) is the most common form of online communication. Each participant can write and post messages, usually in response to a prescribed discussion question or task at their convenience. The submitted posts form so-called discussion threads, each post bearing a date and time stamp as well as its author's name. Online discussions do not take place at any one time, but rather over a period of time, remaining open for posts from participants for 1 week, for example. Participants often have the option of attaching files to their posts or including images and hyperlinks to their written messages.

Asynchronous discussion areas can be structured in different ways depending on the software used. The discussion area or folder is usually the highest level in the hierarchy of messages, the compiled list of which forms the so-called discussion thread. Discussion threads can become increasingly branched depending on the nature of the discussion activity, ie as responses to previous posts or as new topics. Discussion threads over 20 or more posts can quickly become overwhelming. See [Unit 4 section 4.2](#) for discussion time management tips.

<u>Subject</u>	 <u>Messages</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Date</u>
Discussion activity 6		L	20 March 2006 10:49 PM
sampling		M	25 March 2006 8:46 PM
 Sampling 	2	S	26 March 2006 6:54 PM
Re:Sampling		L	28 March 2006 1:54 PM
 Sampling discussion 	2	H	27 March 2006 8:50 AM
Re:Sampling discussion		S	28 March 2006 8:00 PM
 Discussion activity 6 	 6	G	27 March 2006 11:18 AM
Re:Discussion activity 6		L	28 March 2006 2:03 PM
Re:Discussion activity 6		G	28 March 2006 2:43 PM
Re:Discussion activity 6		S	28 March 2006 7:52 PM
Re:Discussion activity 6		H	29 March 2006 9:54 AM
Re:Discussion activity 6		G	30 March 2006 4:26 PM

Figure7: Example discussion thread

1.1 Why would I use it?

The online discussion is very much like a seminar discussion in which students share their views with one another (orally) and with the tutor. The difference is the time span during which (written) thought exchanges take place. A classroom discussion takes place within a short time (45 minutes), each participant responding immediately to the comments of the other. Online, discussions take place over the course of many days, each participant responding to posts at very different times.

This mode of communication bears with it a number of advantages that include:

- A means of extending lecture or seminar discussion time adding time to reflect which can enhance the quality of discussions
- Students can include links to web resources in their posts
- Invited guests can enrich discussions
- Written archives of discussions available for study, research and review.

Online discussions can be used to support a sheer endless number of online activities either to support a lecture or within a fully online module! Regardless of how you choose to use the discussion tool remember to:

- Point out netiquette guidelines (see [Appendix 8](#)),
- Always state the purpose of the discussion clearly to your students
- Post the first message-nothing more uninviting than an empty discussion board. Imagine being asked to reflect out loud to a desolate lecture theatre!

► See [Unit 4](#) and [Unit 8](#) for more guidance on preparing and supporting online discussions.

1.2 Uses of the asynchronous discussion

1.2.1 Informal social space (eg Chatterbox, Teatime)

This one requires nearly no moderation activity from you at all, but goes a long way to foster a supportive learner community. Keep an informal discussion area open for your students to socialise beyond module related material and watch them chit-chat and 'gel'!

1.2.2 Problems forum

A painless way to familiarise yourself with the discussion tool and really reduces e-mail traffic from students. Create a Problems Forum right on the Homepage of your VLE and invite students to post module related questions there, encouraging them to help each other out (students as mentors). Let your students know when they can expect to hear back from you (eg 'I will do my best to respond to your queries within 24 hours.')

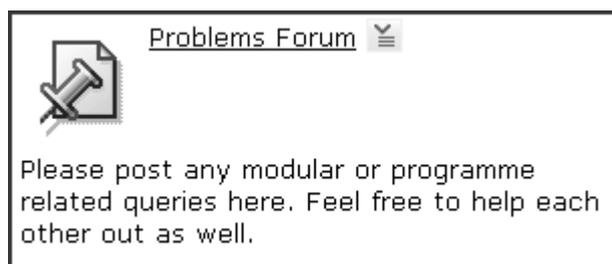


Figure 8: Problems Forum discussion icon and annotation in WebCT

1.2.3 Directed Discussion

A directed discussion is kick-started by one person (usually the tutor, but can also be a student) who asks a question to an assigned reading, current events issue or case study, for example. Discussion questions are best kept open-ended in order to invite a wide range of ideas and perspectives. Students will either respond directly to the question or to the response of another student. The tutor's primary role is to prompt further thought, and to encourage engagement.

Example

'The World Commission on Environment and Development states, *'At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth'*.

'Discuss ways in which some of our present modes of development violate this prescription.'

1.2.4 Debate

For an online debate the instructor will set the scene by describing a scenario or by sharing a real case study to comment on. (Consult online case study repositories such as The Case Studies in Science databank at <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/ubcase.htm> for ideas.)

Debates work especially well with smaller groups of students, each group being assigned a role or task etc. Your role as moderator would be to chair and manage the debate and then summarise points made at the end.

Example 1

Exploring Ecotourism

'Trucks carrying sight-seers through the African savannah may be missing the ecological point. When is a tour an 'ecotour' and not just a green label for an average beach resort holiday? Is travelling thousands of miles by plane to a mud hut for one week a sustainable form of vacationing?

In order to explore the weaknesses and strengths of ecotourism. for this activity you are split into four groups. Group 1 represents the tourists, group 2 the native townsfolk, group 3 an environmentalist and group 4 the travel agent. Research the pros and cons this week from your assigned perspective in order to take a firm and informed stand next week in a town hall meeting at which all interest groups have been invited to

express their views about opening a previously protected rainforest area to ecotourism. Your tutor will chair the meeting.'

Example 2

'Using your critical thinking skills, debate this statement: 'A sustainable energy strategy won't work. It will cost money and lose jobs.' Provide examples to support your stand.'

1.2.5 Peer review

The online discussion board lends itself well to the constructive criticism of peers to each other's written work previously submitted and published for public viewing. Be sure to hold a sample session beforehand in which all students are asked to critically review an essay you have uploaded for practice purposes. Provide peer review guidelines and explain the value of a peer review activity.

1.2.6 Student led discussion activity

Rather than moderate each discussion yourself, consider letting your students have a go! Not in the first weeks of the term, but by midterm, you may find a student-led discussion an appropriate activity to support a learning outcome. It can be an opportunity for students to practice a range of social skills such as giving constructive feedback, reconciling differences, and promoting communication.

2.0 Chat tool and whiteboard

The chat tool is a synchronous communications tool which allows for immediate written interaction between participants. Usually, all users are listed in a column on the right side of the chat interface. A whiteboard is often made available together with the chat tool which is a shared space for creating images, drawing graphs, or uploading files for general viewing. The difference between the chat tool and the discussion board lies in the time frame of communication. A chat takes place in actual real-time, in other words, participants post messages to one another which appear within seconds on the screen to anyone in the chat room. Some chat tools allow for private chats as well.

'Whiteboarding' can become quite sophisticated depending on the software used. In addition to shared mouse controlled sketching and typing some packages include application sharing, audio and video conferencing. Not yet common in education, but useful to be aware of are the visual chats or avatar chats that allow users to communicate not merely using written words but graphically. Users adopt visual features, customise the appearance of the chat room and move about in it, speech bubbles, for example, appearing alongside a chosen figure rather than in the text entry bar (find a free multimedia chat at Palace, <http://practice.chatserve.com/>).

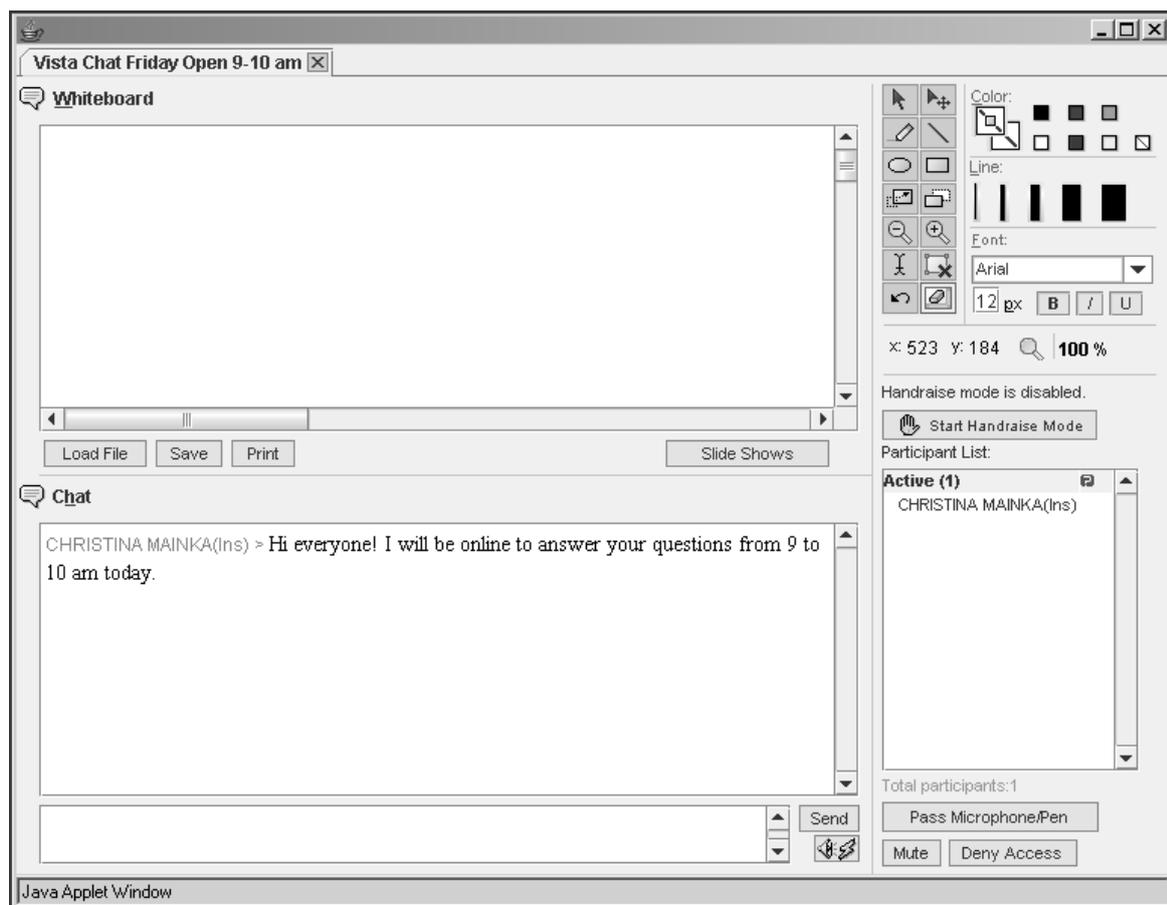


Figure 9: WebCT chat tool and whiteboard

2.1 Why would I use it?

The chat room, as a common form of real-time online communication, adds immediacy to communication in the VLE. Using it alongside the discussion board lends online interaction a more personal tone and enlivens online education. One complements the other and together they ensure that students have ample opportunity to grow as a community of learners.

2.2 Uses of the chat tool

2.2.1 Socialisation space

Similar to the informal discussion board, students welcome the opportunity to socialise given a synchronous space such as an informal chat room to do so. Create a space for them and label it accordingly (eg 'Take a break') to set it off from other more formal chat spaces and remind them that in order to use it they will have to meet at an agreed time.

2.2.2 Virtual office hours

Creating a chat tool to extend general office hours virtually gives the student an added opportunity to contact you from any location for immediate feedback and provides you with a less onerous way of advising students. In individual chat sessions aided by a whiteboard you may be able to assist a student struggling with a certain concept, better than in an e-mail. Consider using the chat tool to follow up a submitted assignment with a question to a student. By announcing office hour chat sessions you can enter the chat room and then focus on other tasks until a student enters the room.

2.2.3 Group-work activities

Group-work activities are supported well by the availability of a chat room. Some VLEs have group-work areas that include discussion, chat and e-mail as modes of group communication. The chat lends itself well for brainstorming ideas, making quick decisions within the group (picking a chairperson, dividing up tasks, finalising a document) and discussing controversial current events issues that relate to the task.

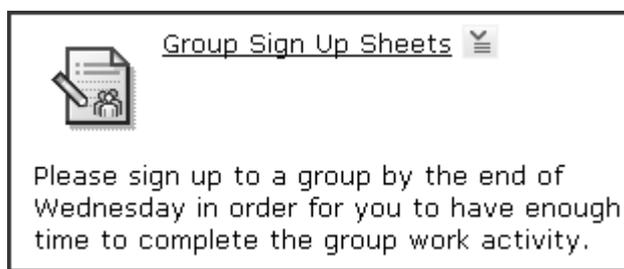


Figure 10: Group sign up sheets in WebCT

2.2.4 Online learning activity

Activities such as role-play, debates, guest sessions can be carried out in the chat room with 4-5 students. Sessions should be no longer than 45-60 minutes, allowing for extra time in the beginning for greetings and introductions. Give students the assignment, readings, questions or task to think about for the chat session beforehand. For example, for a role play activity students would research a position or perspective before the chat then discuss issues with students playing other roles in the chat room, moderated by the instructor who asks questions, or prompts 'players' to ask questions of one another.

Used in conjunction with the discussion tool it complements the discussion forum well by offering a more spontaneous mode of communication for expressing opinions about a current controversy or policy decision related to the subject matter under study, for example. Keep a log for the benefit of those who could not attend.

There are a number of freely available chat tools on the web such as chatzy at <http://www.chatzy.com/>. Internet telephony tools such as SKYPE (see section 5.3) and web conferencing tools (eg Elluminate[®], Wimba[®]) support synchronous chats as well.

► See [Unit 3 section 3.3](#) and [Unit 6](#) for more examples of online activities.

3.0 E-mail

Hard to imagine e-mail used to support teaching and learning beyond answering student queries about assignment due dates? Using e-mail to support student learning is easy and needn't end as an FAQ session for you, so please read on!

As an asynchronous communications tool e-mail shares some of the benefits of the discussion board and early online courses were in fact e-mail communications driven. If designing and developing a VLE is beyond your reach for now, consider using e-mail to encourage contact to partner institutions, for example, or experts from the industry who might then join the class for an e-mail FAQs session (let the guest answer!). Have your students practice foreign language written communication skills in e-mail communications to a foreign pen pal. Assign smaller groups of students to work collaboratively in a wiki (see [section 6.2](#)) on a group project using e-mail to maintain regular contact.

4.0 Online collaboration

Online collaboration offers the convenience of meeting as a group from a range of different locations, the university, work or even from the comfort of the students' own homes. Group-work in general is a highly recommended undertaking, promoting the development of multiple perspectives and shared understandings between students. Online, however, group-work activity can bear unsuspecting challenges and pit falls for students and tutor alike.

4.1 Online myths

Four common myths about online group-work include:

1. **The student knows how to collaborate in the group.** Not true. Students are poor collaborators and without explicit written guidelines to the nature and purpose of the assignment, assessment specifications, role of individual group members, group communication timeline, writing plan, methodology of writing, choice of references etc the students will not manage the group-work appropriately.
2. **Students enjoy group-work.** No, they don't. Students work and have families and lead busy lives. Group-work projects require additional planning and co-ordination and are often associated with conflict and resentment. Online, being asked to co-operate closely with peers without having met face-to-face proves to remain a daunting task for some students. Be absolutely sure the intended project is meaningful and serves a purpose within the learning outcomes and goals.
3. **A group-work project results in less work for the tutor.** Not necessarily. The student requires more explicit written guidance. Online students feel challenged to communicate well with each other and may require

encouragement and monitoring by the tutor throughout their discussions to ensure fair, polite and meaningful communication.

4. **Online teaching should always include a collaborative group assignment.** While it is undisputed that collaborative learning fosters team work skills and enhances understanding, there are situations in which group-work is best omitted in the online environment. A student body largely unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the online environment, web research skills, and nature of asynchronous communication is overwhelmed and easily discouraged in the face of the more frequent communication expected for a collaborative assignment. An inexperienced online tutor may not appreciate the time commitment associated with collaborative work and could easily find him or herself unprepared to handle precarious student situations arising within the group.

Nevertheless, there are many examples of modules in which online group-work has proven to be a very rewarding experience. Take a look at the group-work activity in the BSc Complementary Therapy module below.

Example

Group-work activity in the blended module: Neuromuscular principles of movement and therapy

Edinburgh Napier first year students on this module attended one lecture and one practical per week. WebCT was used predominantly to support online assessment and discussion activity. By week 12 of the module students were expected to have worked collaboratively in groups of 4-5 students to produce an online presentation for the class which was subsequently published on the discussion board for peer review upon completion of the projects. Each group was assigned a different topic. The group-work assignment was worth 50% of the students' final grade.

The groups were identified early in week 1 of the module, giving all group members enough time to get to know one another. The Module Overview made it very clear to the students that aside from familiarising themselves with WebCT, learning to work as part of a team was crucial to the success of the assignment. Any student who failed to take his/her fair share of the workload, or to meet the commitments as identified by the team, would fail the assessment; The peer assessment of another group's work took place online. Detailed guidelines for honest, critical feedback were provided by the tutor to the students by week 10.

According to the tutor the assignment worked extremely well. She was very impressed by the quality of work produced by first year students. Their ability to organise their work online and produce professional, PowerPoint® submissions was exemplary. The online peer assessment was more difficult to manage and there was a tendency for some students to give good results, but these were balanced by the tutor marks.

The students initially were very apprehensive at the thought of peer assessment but in their reflective diaries they all identified how much fun they had had. They loved seeing the other group presentations and became quite competitive with each other. They also commented that they were grateful for the chance to get to engage with online technology in their first year

Mail	Group	Description
	<u>Group01</u>	Explain Neuromuscular Specific Conditioning
	<u>Group02</u>	Explain Neuromuscular Patterning Conditioning
	<u>Group03</u>	Explain the concept of adaptive tissue

Figure 11: Groups in WebCT module: Neuromuscular principles of movement and therapy

4.2 Teaching tips

In order to improve the chances of a successful group-work activity consider the following:

- Save time by consulting online resources such as the Intute Virtual Training Suite at <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/> for examples of group-work activities that have already worked.
- In particular for fully online modules, timetable the group-work activity for mid-term or later in order to give students enough time to get to know one another
- Assign groups at least one week before the activity commences in order for group members to introduce each other and choose a chairperson.
- Create an appropriate assignment with clear learning outcomes and explicit study group guidelines (see [Appendix 9](#))
- Create a system to monitor team work activity in order to incorporate fair assessment of individual contributions.
- Explain to the students the benefits of group-work over individual work such as:
 - A group of people has more ideas than an individual
 - A group is more likely to spot mistakes
 - Students often communicate better than tutors to students
 - Learning is done best by teaching others
 - A group lends support and encouragement
 - A group get the job done faster.

5.0 Online collaboration tools

Let's take a look at some tools that support online collaboration. In addition to the asynchronous discussion, synchronous, text-based chat and instant messaging there are collaboration tools (eg web conferencing tools) that can support synchronous interaction of higher degrees of complexity allowing users to see and hear each other and to share documents and presentations, for example.

Before deciding to use one over the other, however, it is important (again!) to match the intended purpose carefully with the features of the tool. To support a collaborative activity assigned in a course delivered face-to-face, you would hardly choose video conferencing over chat for a virtual group meeting, for example. On the other hand international students on a fully online module will embrace the opportunity to see and hear peers at a meeting they might otherwise only know from written communication. The increased complexity of the so-called interaction 'rich' technology tools might be warranted for a virtual lecture demonstration of a particularly difficult concept, during which students have the opportunity to interrupt and ask questions and to hear contributions from their peers. Whether or not students need to share documents during this virtual lecture, has further implications still for your final choice of software, as will the cost, hardware and software requirements, and ease of use.

Find below a short presentation of the most common technologies to support online collaboration. One drawback of each application is the potential cost of the commercial software and recommended high band width internet connection speed (DSL) that not all users will have access to.

Social computing applications are discussed in the next section.

5.1 Desktop sharing applications

Desktop sharing applications allow multiple users to write and draw on the same display screen as well as share applications such as a PowerPoint® presentation or audio clip. The supporting software is required by all users, for example, Festoon (<http://www.festooninc.com/>).

5.2 Audio conferencing

Audio conferencing (Internet Telephony also referred to as Voice over internet protocol, VoIP), allows multiple users to hold a real-time phone conversation over the internet.

Audio (and video technologies) used within the online teaching and learning environment lend to it some of the familiarity and comfort of the traditional classroom. Distance learners in particular are often at risk of feeling isolated and are comforted by hearing the voice of their tutor or seeing their peers.

Audio is finding increasing use in education not only to deliver short lectures, but to facilitate student presentations, question answer sessions with expert guests, practice foreign language conversation skills, and to hold group meetings.

All users must download the supporting free software such as SKYPE (<http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/get-skype/>), GoogleTalk (<http://www.google.com/talk/>) or commercial software, for example, Polycom (<http://www.polycom.com/>).

5.3 Video conferencing

Video conferencing allows multiple users to see and speak to each other using streaming video and audio over the internet.

All users will require supporting software such as SKYPE (free download at <http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/get-skype/>) or WEBEX (free trial at <http://www.webex.co.uk/>) for one-to-one or one-to-many video conferencing.

5.4 Interaction 'rich' web collaboration tools

Finally, web collaborative tools exist that offer a combination of the above listed applications for you and your students-and more. These interaction 'rich' web collaboration tools allow instant messaging, document and multi media-sharing, audio and video conferencing.

Only the presenter of content requires the collaboration software such as for the commercial software, ElluminateLive!® (<http://www.illuminate.com/>), for example, which Edinburgh Napier University has subscribed to. For more information you are referred to the Professional Development team's ElluminateLive!® support page at <http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/academicdevelopment/professionaldevelopment/TEL/illuminate/>

6.0 Social computing

Increasingly popular and easy to use are the freely available social computing tools (also known as social networking tools or social software) such as blogs, wikis and social networking platforms such as Bebo, Facebook, and Twitter. These are essentially web publishing tools that allow for single or multiple authors, respectively and which collectively fall under the heading 'web 2.0' also known as the 'social web' in stark contrast to the original static web pages of web 1.0.

Judging by the sheer explosion of use of these tools in the public domain and the subsequent spontaneous development of communities of shared practice, it is fair to say that the promise of social computing to foster more effective knowledge generation, creation and sharing, collective decision making and collaboration is

not yet even close to reaching its full potential in research and educational settings. In other words: Watch this web 2.0 space! In the meantime should you decide to use web 2.0 tools in your teaching do consult Edinburgh Napier's web 2.0 guidelines for staff and students as there are things to be aware of when using non-institutional web services for teaching purposes. Explicit guidance is available at

<http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/CorporateAffairs/governance/DataProtection/Pages/InternetServices.aspx>

6.1 Blogs

A blog (short for web log) is a website that requires no special technical knowledge to create where the author can publish thoughts or ideas that make up timely entries appearing linearly, in chronological order. A blog is interactive and most commonly open to comments by other readers, but not to edits. The newest type of blog is the video blog or vlog. Blogs are text-based, whereas vlogs include multimedia files such as video clips.

Early blogs (mid 1990's) were created to share current event issues, their authors posting links, personal thoughts and commentaries. Today, however, blogs are poorly described as merely online journals or personal diaries – they are much more as the examples below show:

- Businesses and learning technology units alike, for example, maintain blogs to keep staff up to date with training and useful resources (see eg <http://ltd-edgehill.blogspot.com/>).
- The State University of California at Chico's Information Literacy librarian maintains five (!) subject related blogs which she updates on a weekly basis in order to ensure that she reaches all academics with new books, services or training dates. Interestingly she avoids using the term blog to describe her information pages but labels them 'news' in order to draw those people in who feel negatively about blogs.
- A number of US universities are using blogs as recruitment tools. Once a week selected first years update blogs in which they write about their lives as students, ie being the authentic student voice to the potential university entrant (see <http://www.scu.edu/blogSCU/>).
- Blogs are an effective means of sharing information with likeminded individuals such as a Hungarian doctor is doing on his blog at <http://scienceroil.com/> in which he shares relevant emergent web 2.0 developments related to medicine and genetics with the wider healthcare community.
- Educational blogs ('edublogs') are blogs dedicated to educational themes and issues and well worth revisiting. Examples of edublogs include Weblogs in Higher education at <http://mchron.net/site/edublog.php> and

one of the most popular by Stephen Downes at <http://www.downes.ca/news/OLDaily.htm>. Search for education blogs using the blog search engine at http://www.blogsearchengine.com/education_blogs

JUNE 2006

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FLICKR PHOTOS

MORE PHOTOS

NEARLY THERE!
Sunday June 11th 2006, 9:56 pm | Edit this
Filed under: Vista June

Sunday, June 11, 2006

June marks not only the month in which the big, white flowering Clematis 'Duchess of Edinburgh' reaches full bloom, but also the month in which Napier University's fourth Online Vista Taster Course in 2006 begins.

Welcome!

Thank you for signing up and making it happen. This space is ours for sharing frustrations, elations, and trepidations at doing 'online', hardly familiar but already so commonplace.

From June 12-20, feel free to share your daily online Vista struggles & elearning discoveries with us here, or simply pop in and find a green story about magnolias and peonias -only two of Scotland's flowering treasures and a reminder for us to always remember to stop and smell the roses!

Christina

P.S. Sorry, this is so tiny-anyone else using WordPress as their blog provider??

27 Comments so far
Leave a comment

Here is your space for posting thoughts! Simply type into the box below, and then click 'Say it.' Let us know who you are. Thank you.

Comment by Christina Mainka 06.11.06 @ 10:12 am | Edit This

Figure12: Example of a blog created to support an Online Taster course at Edinburgh Napier (blog provider: WordPress)

6.1.1 Why use blogs?

Having a dialogue with a community wider than the classroom is empowering for the student, and educators who have their students maintain blogs have observed that students often give public writing more thought than writing for the classroom audience. Furthermore, blogging keeps you involved in a wider dialogue as well!

Benefits of blogs:

- They're free!
- Easy to create and easy to include images, links (to other posts)
- Accessible through the internet
- Automatic knowledge management and archiving (online filing cabinet)
- Easier to invite a guest speaker to join than to the VLE.
- Students reflect more on their written work for a wider audience
- Extends classroom beyond the school

- Facilitates community building
- Promotes peer review
- Fosters relationships beyond the duration of a course.

Instructional blogging is steadily becoming increasingly popular in subject areas from engineering to written composition. Some examples of how blogs are being used by instructors and students include:

- To post assignments, articles, announcements and lesson summaries by instructor
- To host student project development sites,
- to support discussions on course lectures
- for book reviews (including comments by book author),
- for critical literature reviews
- to create student newspapers
- to create business manuals with international business contacts
- as a writing portfolio
- as a peer assessment tool.

A number of nursing programmes in the US are using course blogs very successfully to encourage nurse practitioners to share first work related experiences. 'Professor's blogs' are maintained by teaching staff to share thoughts, resources and ideas beyond the scope of the course and to role model good blogging behaviour.

Example

In a German Conversation course, originally delivered face to face, the instructor created a course blog, replacing one lecture in order for students to practice reading and writing skills in weekly theme related blogs which she kick-started with a series of questions. The lecture and seminar time was then restricted for practicing listening and conversation skills. Invited German guest students from partner institutions contributed to the course blog helping students refine written conversational etiquette even further.

6.1.2 Teaching tips

For a rewarding blogging experience:

- Remind students of netiquette guidelines before they begin blogging
- Provide clear instructions not only of the task but also of how to create the blog.
- Consider requiring mandatory writing assignments and regular commentaries in order to ensure that all students are blogging.
- Be there

As for any communications tool, without a clear purpose blogs will not be used by students. Students want to know that their blog is being read by their peers!

Which blogging software you choose will depend on what you expect to get and which task you have in mind for your students. Before you recommend a blog to your students ask yourself: 'Are you looking for a blog that best supports discussions or that serves as a personal journal?' 'Do you expect the technology to support uploading photos, video and audio clips?'

Evaluate free blogging software such as:

Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>

Livejournal: <http://www.livejournal.com/>

WordPress at: <http://wordpress.org/>

Search for themed blogs using a blog search engine at <http://www.technorati.com/>. Aggregate your blog feeds using Bloglines at <http://www.bloglines.com/>.

If you're not convinced by now might you be inspired by a blog kept by a student on the MSc BOE programme as a reflective learning journal at <http://etreflections.wordpress.com/> or by the MSc BOE tutors themselves as their reflective teaching journal at <http://iboe.wordpress.com/?>

6.2 Wiki

A wiki is a website, actually similar to a blog in structure and logic, but allows for edits to content by any user via any browser. The first wiki created was in 1995 for the Portland Patterns Repository. Wikis are organised by content, an edit trail built in, and inadvertent deletes can be salvaged. Papers uploaded to a wiki can be edited by any of the authors at any time or from any location.

6.2.1 Why use wikis?

Well, it just sounds like a fun thing to do, doesn't it?!

Seriously, wiki spaces are free and straightforward to use and give students ownership of their collaborative learning experience. Whether in a face-to-face course or fully online module consider using wikis for your students to organise a group-work activity, for example. Whether to share lab data or on-site notes, create a photo journal or plan a project, wikis offer versatile collaborative teaching and learning opportunities.

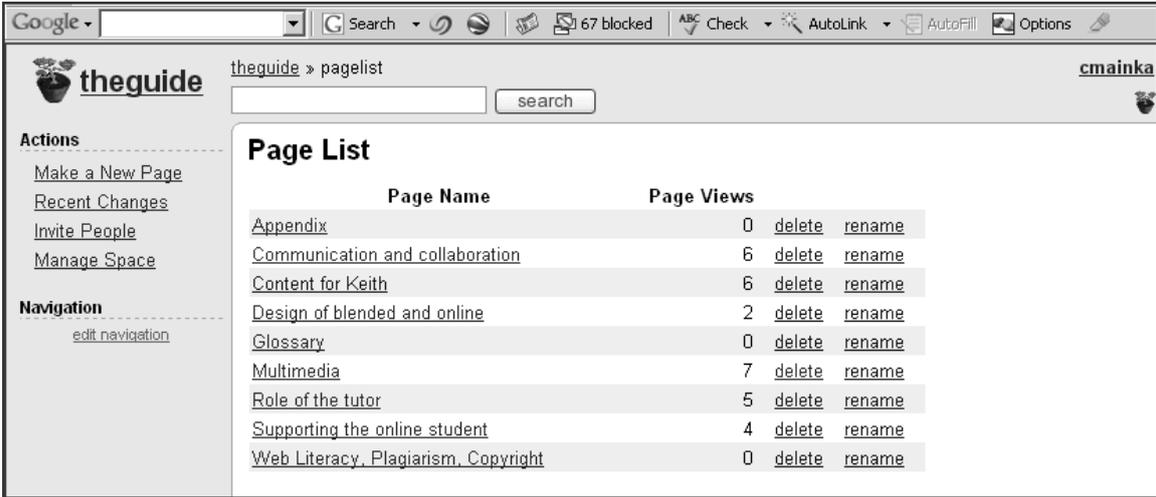
Further uses of wikis include:

- Individual or group reflection in student journals
- Collection and organisation of course related digital material in personal portfolios
- Creation of collaborative knowledge base and related resources
- Maintaining a course website
- Research co-ordination and collaboration.

But wikis are not just for students! Staff development units use wikis to coordinate training timetabling. In schools wikis provide spaces for module leaders to share revisions of common course assets such as assessments, office hours, module handbooks, learning activities without having to meet face-to-face. International research papers are easily prepared in a wiki by the authors regardless of their location. Conference administrators are increasingly recognising the wiki as a valuable resource to organise the event.

Example

Wikis support inquiry-based learning activities particularly well. In a project carried out at a South Dakota middle school (Under Control, The Damming of the Missouri River) students were assigned to groups and used wiki spaces for communication, collaborative knowledge building and problem solving in preparation for the final policy statement for river management.



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a wiki page titled 'Page List'. The browser's address bar shows 'theguide » pagelist'. The page has a search bar and a 'search' button. On the left side, there are navigation links under 'Actions' (Make a New Page, Recent Changes, Invite People, Manage Space) and 'Navigation' (edit navigation). The main content is a table with two columns: 'Page Name' and 'Page Views'. Each row in the table includes a 'delete' and 'rename' link next to the view count.

Page Name	Page Views		
Appendix	0	delete	rename
Communication and collaboration	6	delete	rename
Content for Keith	6	delete	rename
Design of blended and online	2	delete	rename
Glossary	0	delete	rename
Multimedia	7	delete	rename
Role of the tutor	5	delete	rename
Supporting the online student	4	delete	rename
Web Literacy, Plagiarism, Copyright	0	delete	rename

Figure 13: Example of a wiki created to support writing this guide (Wiki provider: wikispaces)

Freely available wikis for you to review:

Wikispaces: <http://www.wikispaces.com/>

Peanut butter wiki: <http://pbworks.com/>

Tikiwiki: <http://info.tikiwiki.org/tiki-index.php>

Find a comparison of wikis at <http://www.wikimatrix.org/>.

See a recent example of a wiki used by one of the authors to create a conference website at <http://lick2008.wikispaces.com/>.

► See [Unit 4](#) and [Unit 8](#) for further guidance on the role of the tutor and student support issues around online communication.

7.0 Further reading

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